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JOURNALISTS AS BUREAUCRATS: PERCEPTIONS OF "SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY" MEDIA ROLES IN LOCAL EMERGENCY PLANNING

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INTRODUCTION

The news media are playing increasingly important roles as disseminators of vital information about risks, hazards and disaster preparedness. But an ethical question has emerged about whether journalists should **join** emergency planning groups, or only **report** on them from outside the meeting rooms in the interest of objectivity? Environmental threats may help set the stage for new theory of media roles in policy and planning. This paper will address perceptions of appropriate roles for journalists in one type of emergency preparedness organization—the Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs) organized by mandate of the Superfund legislation of 1986.

There is no agreement about just how the mass media do fit in—or ought to fit in—with emergency management and planning. Some observers argue that the media have built-in organizational, competitive and institutional biases which prevent them from effectively undertaking the role of informing citizens about hazards (Winsten 1985). Yet the fact remains that, regardless of such reservations about their ability to play the role effectively, the media **do** carry considerable information about some hazards and risks to most people (McCallum and Hammond 1990). Some writers have gone further and argued a normative position that the media should be **the** vehicle to provide such information (Winsten 1985; Elliot 1988). But no one has yet seriously addressed the question of whether the news media are predisposed to (a) become part of organized efforts for emergency management, (b) remain wholly on the outside, or (c) occupy a limited partnership role

that preserves their independence yet lets them join with emergency planners for constructive work.

The strengths of the mass media lie partly in their independence from government or other agencies and partly in their ability to attract large audiences which regard them as reasonably credible information sources. Both of these roles have been cited as important virtues of mass media by citizens facing immediate and long-term threats (Perry and Lindell 1989) and by emergency managers faced with educating communities regarding hazards (Perry, in press.) The mass media in the United States have been characterized in ambiguous ways because they are privately owned enterprises that admit to public obligations and a public trust (Altschull 1984). As private enterprises, they are positioned to provide the public with a perspective on public issues that is at least theoretically independent of government, the rest of the private sector, and interest groups. The watchdog role of the media demands that they be "continually critical, analytic and vigilant in illustrating problems of government" (Elliot 1987, p. 8). Yet the media are also portrayed as dependent upon government to define the news, reporting on issues only when they are legitimized by elected officials or bureaucrats (Karp 1989). Antipathy between the press and scientists, the press and the military, and even the press and athletic teams often focuses on ground rules for coverage. Similarly, any consideration of partnership roles for the mass media with emergency managers must address the practical issue of independence of news gathering operations.

Reporters and editors are not professionals in terms of being required to undergo a common education, learn technical jargon, or subscribe to a standard code of ethics. If journalists' education is deficient in areas that might prepare them to understand and communicate the technical nature of risk and hazards, then some media advocates would argue that their obligation is to act as a surrogate for the layman. In this role, they would absorb and transform technical information provided by either experts or mediators between experts and laymen, and to relay that information to a public that is often even less well prepared to grasp technical information and concepts. On the whole, "science writers" have effectively filled this latter function for many years (Friedman, Dunwoody, and Rogers 1986). This has been particularly true when dealing with disaster threats that are highly technical such as the Three Mile Island nuclear accident and Chernobyl (Lindell and Perry 1990; Martin 1980), or with those that are unfamiliar to the public

such as the initial eruptions of the Mount St. Helens volcano (Lindell and Perry 1990).

In recent years, journalists have become part of a national effort to prepare local communities to face the threat of chemical disasters. At the same time, theory in the field of disasters and hazard management has emphasized the need for new mass media roles to better inform citizens and communities to understand and prepare for disasters (Wilkins 1986; Elliott 1988). Traditionally, the media role has been conceived as part of the larger setting of managing natural and man-made disaster threats (cf. Perry 1985). Basically this view of media divides the role into two components: a communication aspect and a disaster phase aspect. Figure 1 crosstabulates these two dimensions and lists appropriate relevant media activities in each cell. Essentially, this conception acknowledges four basic activities in the media role. With respect to citizens in the mitigation/preparedness phase, the media explain risks and identify those responsible for managing them, as well as appropriate protective strategies. When we switch to the response/recovery phase, media are seen as relayers of official information and protective techniques which citizens are expected to undertake immediately. When officials are the target audience in mitigation/preparedness, media are seen as educators, conduits for relaying information through intergovernmental structures and channels to bring citizens' concerns to official attention. Finally, when communicating to officials in the response/recovery phases, media activities are also seen in terms of highlighting citizen concerns and relaying information among agencies.

It is interesting to point out that this four-fold media role was conceived largely by academic disaster researchers and planners (cf. Perry 1985). In practice, emergency managers have acknowledged only one cell as important: relaying information to citizens during the response phase. Communicating mitigation/preparedness information to citizens has been given some attention by some emergency managers, but it is a more rare event. Acknowledging media as communicating to officials in any disaster phase remains controversial among emergency managers. Thus, what actually happens in the practice of emergency management is even more narrow than the traditional role of the media, which is in itself a constricted view. There are a variety of functions of media that could greatly extend the traditional role, and in doing so enhance the quality of emergency management. Such

extensions, however, depend upon better understanding of the relations between media professionals and emergency management officials.

Figure 1
Traditional Emergency Management View of Mass Media Roles

	Communication to:	
Disaster Phase	Citizens	Officials
Mitigation/ Preparedness	• Explain risks • Identify sources of information • Identify agencies responsible for management and planning • Identify solutions	• Educate uninformed officials • Serve as inter-governmental conduit for information • Bring new threats to official attention • Bring citizen concerns to official attention
Response/ Recovery	• Relay information from monitoring authorities • Relay protective actions to be acted on immediately	• Bring citizen concerns to official attention • Relay information among multiple jurisdictions

Meanwhile, the relations between news media professionals and emergency managers take place against a backdrop of hostility and a deep-seated belief in traditional confrontation. Not only do media distrust officials, but emergency managers distrust and fear media, often because reporters are seen either as impediments to response operations or as outside "evaluators" critiquing management and planning actions. However, the events of the last few years merit careful review. There are signs of an easing of the long-standing church vs. state posture of professional journalism.

After the turn of the century, the classical position of U.S. journalists had been hard-line emphasis on something vaguely defined as "objectivity" and formal opposition to involvement with politics or policymaking. The dichotomy was framed in terms of a contrast between personal "objectivity"

and a notion that was described by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1973) as the "social responsibility" theory of journalism. Social responsibility permits, or may even require, an attitude of activism, a degree of journalistic participation in improvement of public life, and a social agenda. Social responsibility, however, envisions the journalist at the typewriter, not at the policy-making table. No theory has gone so far as to suggest that journalists might actually **join** the policymakers—elected or administrative. Earlier theory would see that as an unacceptable compromise of journalistic integrity.

Journalists' attitudes toward legitimate participatory roles in public life have been narrowly defined. One study (Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman 1976) examined whether journalists could sanction any "participant" values for themselves. Those values were defined in terms of a contrast between being a spectator to public events, on one hand, and imposing a point of view. To see how far distant the participant journalist was from actual membership in a government body, we might note that Carey (1969, p. 32) described a participant journalist as one whose activism was limited to being a "broker in symbols," a translator for government language into layman's language, and even at that "he loses his independence...." Nowhere has the radical idea been seriously suggested that, within the mainstream U.S. tradition of journalistic ethics, the journalist could join those who make policy. Yet that is, it seems, what has happened in the LEPC experiment.

Since it began in 1986, this "invisible experiment" has required that journalists be included in membership in Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs) which conceptualize community response strategy for chemical emergencies. The 3,000 or so LEPCs in the United States, then, represent a field experiment, one which has received virtually no sustained publicity and might thus be termed an "invisible" experiment. Insofar as it brings together journalists and bureaucrats on a policy body, the LEPCs may constitute a unique experience for both U.S. journalism and public administration.

The experiment joining these two traditional adversaries—the press and bureaucrats—was set in place by the Superfund Amendments Reauthorization Act (SARA) Title III legislation, signed into law by President Reagan on Oct. 17, 1986. SARA was passed by Congress in the legislative aftermath of the disastrous Dec. 3, 1984, chemical explosion in Bhopal, India. Estimates of deaths in that disaster range from 2,700 to 8,000 (Wilkins 1989)

One estimate held that in the U.S. nearly 7,000 chemical accidents has killed 135 and injured 1,500 from 1980 to 1984, and lawmakers set out to ensure that another Bhopal would not happen here. By enlisting communities throughout the U.S., SARA was intended to reduce the likelihood of such a chemical disaster anywhere in the United States. The legislation required that each of the 50 states create LEPCs and specified several categories of committee membership. Title III required membership by the "media," a term generally taken to refer to the news media, along with public and private officials and interest groups. News media represented on the LEPCs have included newspapers, broadcast media, and in some cases other media such as cable television systems.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper will examine perceptions of journalists' roles as members of LEPCs primarily from two points of view, that of journalists, on one hand, and that of bureaucrats, private sector representatives, and others on the planning committees in Arizona. Research questions include:

(1) Should journalists serve on a public policymaking body such as the Local Emergency Planning Committees?

Should journalists attend committee meetings at all when there is no news story to be covered—and therefore less chance of a conflict of interest between the reporting function and the function of helping the community prepare to cope with a toxic chemical disaster? Do journalists and LEPC members differ on those questions?

(2) If news media representatives are to attend, what are appropriate roles for them to play as members of such a committee?

(3) Does membership on a community's LEPC pose a conflict of interest for journalists?

Two cautions are in order. First, it should be noted that in some parts of the United States, journalists have declined to join the LEPCs as a matter of principle (Hadden 1989). In Arizona, however, every local committee has reported success in obtaining cooperation from journalists or other news media representatives who have joined the committees (Burkhart 1989). Thus, the experiences of committees in various regions may differ and a broader national study may be warranted.

Further, the chemical emergency at Bhopal and the threat of chemical disasters in the United States is a particularly alarming type of technological, or man-made, hazard. Research indicates that people respond differently to environmental threats related to manmade hazards than to natural hazards (Baum 1988). Thus, the case of chemical emergency planning may not be representative of reporters' attitudes toward policy organizations generally, and media professionals may be reluctant to go along with federally mandated media membership on other policymaking bodies, especially in areas that make headlines as frequently as do chemical hazards and disasters.

METHODS

In this exploratory study in Arizona, journalists and LEPCs were sent questionnaires concerning chemical hazards and the work of LEPCs. Metro newspapers were reluctant either to distribute questionnaires to reporters or to provide home addresses of reporters. Finally, one of four major metro newspapers distributed the questionnaires in the newsroom, providing a population of 23 "metro daily" journalists; they are believed to be representative of the state's other three metro papers. Two television newsrooms participated, providing 10 local television journalists. Six journalists from a small daily took part. Questionnaires were sent to members of three urban and two rural LEPCs. One in each category participated, providing 22 LEPC members who filled out questionnaires during meetings. The other LEPCs did not hold meetings during the study period.

A total of 61 completed questionnaires form the data base examined here. It is acknowledged that these data do not form a traditional statistical sample of any defined population. At best, the sampling procedure yielded a convenience sample (Blalock 1979). Consequently, these data may not be used to appropriately make statistical generalizations (estimates of parameters) to any population; not the media members of LEPC's in Arizona or elsewhere. This does not mean, however, that the data are not useful. In an area where virtually no information exists, these data may be used inductively to clarify definitions of issues and variables and to begin to assess apparent relationships among variables that can aid the formation of hypotheses to be tested in subsequent studies. More narrowly, it must be acknowledged that the external validity of conclusions from these data depends upon the "logic of replication" (Selltiz et al. 1976). Thus, to the extent that future studies obtain similar results from questioning

convenience samples, we acquire some confidence that the results obtained in this study are generalizable. Of course, the purpose of exploratory studies is not generalization, but understanding of a problem.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following section summarizes and discusses the responses to the major questions on the questionnaire.

(1) Should journalists serve on a public policy body such as the Local Emergency Planning Committees?

Responses by journalists and Local Emergency Planning Committee members differed markedly (see Table 1). LEPC members (82%) were in favor. Journalists were unsure. Metro journalists were favorable (61% were for the idea or neutral). Half the television journalists were opposed (but the small numbers make it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions on this and other questions). Only the small daily journalists were almost as strongly in favor of journalists joining LEPCs (70%) as were the LEPC members. Another question addressed the issue of whether journalists should **attend** LEPC meetings at all, and as expected all three categories of journalists replied that they should do so, as did the LEPC members. The journalists' views on appropriateness of committee membership correlated strongly with their views on whether joining posed a First Amendment conflict of interest for journalists (Pearson's r = .5944; p<.001).

Table 1
Do Journalists Belong on LEPCs as Full Members?

	Media/Status			
	Metro Newspaper	Small Daily	TV	LEPC Member
No, they don't.	39%	20%	50%	9%
Neutral.	9	10	33	9
Yes, they do.	52	70	17	82
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
N =	23	6	10	22

(2) What are the appropriate roles for journalists to play as members of such a committee?

Journalists differed with LEPC members on what their appropriate role should be (see Table 2).

Table 2
What Activities Should Journalists Perform for the LEPC as Members?

	Media/Status			
Activity[a]	Metro Newspaper	Small Daily	TV	LEPC Member
They should do PR work.	17%	50%	10%	82%
They should vote on policy.	26	0	30	73
They should cover LEPC news.	39	67	60	73
Tell LEPCs how to inform media.	87	100	90	82
Attend to learn about hazards.	70	100	100	73
N =	23	6	10	22

[a] Respondents could endorse multiple activities; each percentage in a column uses the column total as base.

Journalists felt that as LEPC members, journalists should:

- NOT do public relations.
- NOT vote on policy.
- NOT report on news of the committee when they participate on the same committee.

In each case, LEPC members felt the **opposite** way.

Perhaps surprisingly, given their sharp disagreements on the above three issues, journalists and LEPC members agreed on two points, that journalists who join LEPCs should:

- Tell the LEPC how to keep journalists informed during chemical emergencies.
- Learn about the nature of local chemical hazards and how to cope with emergencies.

When asked whether journalists should join to help LEPCs learn how to inform the media, journalists were more strongly supportive of the idea than were members of LEPCs themselves. This was clearly a role the journalists could endorse enthusiastically.

(3) Does membership on the LEPC pose a conflict of interest for journalists?

Journalists were undecided about this question (see Table 3). Television journalists believed that membership was a conflict of interest; metro newspaper journalists believed it did **not**; the small-daily reporters were mixed. The LEPC members saw no conflict of interest. This question illustrated another aspect of the contrast in perceptions of media roles among the media and between the media and the LEPC members generally.

Table 3
Do Journalists Face a Conflict of Interest by Joining an LEPC?

	Media/Status			
	Metro Newspaper	Small Daily	TV	LEPC Member
No, they don't.	52%	17%	30%	86%
Neutral.	4	67	20	9
Yes, they do.	44	17	50	5
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
N =	23	6	10	22

VIEWS REGARDING COVERAGE OF HAZARDS

Two questions asked whether journalists adequately cover chemical hazard issues. Metro newspaper journalists believed that the long term effects of chemical hazards are well covered, while the other two media groups and the LEPC members were undecided. Asked whether the news

television journalists believed they did so, while the other media groups and LEPC members were undecided.

However, there was near unanimity on two questions that asked whether journalists have a responsibility to educate the public on issues generally and on chemical hazards specifically. All of the journalists and LEPC members agreed that journalists do bear a responsibility for education about public issues in general and specifically with regard to chemical hazards. However, the small daily journalists felt the larger news media responsibility did not extend to educating the public on the chemical hazard issue.

CONCLUSIONS

While these findings are based on a convenience sample of media organizations and LEPCs, there is no reason to regard these organizations or committees as particularly unrepresentative of others in Arizona. The findings do suggest that there would be value in further study of these questions to identify differences in perceptions of roles across categories of the media.

The newspaper reporters appeared to have a fairly traditional view of the role of journalists on LEPCs. They opposed doing PR, voting, and reporting the LEPC news while being a member of the group. They supported joining LEPCs to help members understand the needs of journalists in an emergency and to learn more about hazards.

Television reporters were more likely to be supportive of reporting about the work of an LEPC by a committee member from the media; small daily journalists felt that way too. The numbers involved are small, but the pattern may have significance in terms of the harder line taken by metro journalists on the possibility of a conflict of interest represented by membership on the LEPC (see Table 3).

However, the larger significance of the findings is that, at least for the issue of chemical emergency planning, the thinking among journalists may be more amenable to cooperation with LEPCs than might have been expected. The journalists felt there was a professional responsibility to educate citizens on issues in general and also felt that this responsibility extended to educating citizens about local chemical hazards. In other words, the media felt that the broader principle of responsibility applied to a specific

These data suggest that there are partnership roles for the news media with chemical emergency planning groups, and they include such activities as attending the LEPC meetings, learning about the hazards, and sharing professional needs of journalists in emergencies. Our findings also suggest that journalists and LEPCs member hold contrasting perceptions of suitable roles for journalists in regard to doing public relations work in the community, voting on policy, and reporting as an LEPC member.

If these data are any indication, the future may well see journalists choosing from a variety of models of "social responsibility" involvement in public policy and planning organizations. At the same time, journalists may seek ways to carry out their traditional roles of watchdog and neutral information channel with regard to policy and policymakers. In particular, this suggests that journalists may be willing to explore more general ideas of a partnership with emergency planners and officials aimed at improving the practice of hazard management. In this way, some consensus may evolve regarding how the traditional emergency management view of media roles may be made more meaningful. In any case, the ethical dimensions of these relationships seem certain to grow more complex.

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